

## Going native: long-running television serials in the UK

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# GOING NATIVE: LONG-RUNNING TELEVISION SERIALS IN THE UK

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Soap opera; minority language; Welsh; Gaelic; Scots.

## ABSTRACT

This article examines in detail the development of the long-running serial in the UK, from its beginnings on radio in the 1940s, through the move to television in the mid 1950s and then up to the present day. It pays particular attention

to language use throughout this period, focusing on the move from Standard English to a wide range of regional dialects during the four decades when these serials were at the height of their popularity, routinely dominating the television ratings. It then examines the development of long-form serials in languages other than English, firstly Welsh from the mid 1970s on, and then Gaelic intermittently from the early 1990s to the present day, and finally Scots, a highly minoritised Germanic language spoken mostly in the Scottish Lowlands. It compares both the current health and the future prospects of Gaelic and Scots with a particular focus on the challenges faced by both. Additional insights into the particular case of Gaelic are provided via interviews with a number of stakeholders.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article we provide a historical overview of television serials in the UK as a whole, showing in particular how the soap-opera landscape came to be dominated linguistically first by regional dialects of English, expanding later to accommodate geographically-bounded productions in Welsh, Gaelic and Scots. All the serials in this last group can be termed “minority-language” serials, in the sense that the languages they feature are used by a numerical minority of their respective populations. However, the languages they feature are in fact more correctly classified as “minoritised languages”, a term which applies to any language which is deliberately or even neglectfully deprived of resources for political or other reasons (Hornsby and Agarin 2012). To better understand the longitudinal processes which led to the emergence of these minoritised serials, we open with a discussion of the changing linguistic landscape of UK television serials since the mid-1950s. We show how the language of returning serials challenge the hegemony of London-based upper-class forms of speech, and discuss how minoritised-language serials – more specifically those produced in Scotland – can hope to survive in a broader UK linguistic landscape dominated by the international language *par excellence*, English (Mizumura 2017).

## 2. FROM MONOLINGUAL STANDARD TO MULTIDIALECTAL/MULTILINGUAL CULTURE

Until relatively recently, English – more precisely Standard English – was the *de facto* language of all public communication, including broadcast communication, in the UK. This mode of speech was itself part of a highly restricted communicative repertoire. In Fairclough’s terms on news-casting (rather than serials), it can be considered a form of “parochialism” (2001: 205), where phonology itself became an expression of power. Although other languages and dialects – including regional dialects of English – have always been spoken by communities of various sizes, it was not until the early 1960s that television serials began to appear which challenged the dominance of Standard English (also known as Received Pronunciation, or simply RP) on UK television (*Coronation Street*, ITV, 1960–; *Emmerdale*, ITV, 1972–; *Brookside*, Channel 4, 1982–2003; *EastEnders*, BBC, 1985–). Almost a further fifteen years would elapse before the first television serial appeared in a language other than English –

specifically Welsh (*Pobol y Cwm*, S4C, 1974–) – and the first serial in Gaelic (*Machair*, STV, 1993–1999) would not emerge until almost a further twenty years after that. To date, the one and only television serial featuring Scots, a Germanic language closely related to English and based mainly in the Scottish Lowlands, appeared in 2002.

Scots is by far the most minoritised of these languages. With only a very small number of exceptions, it is largely absent from the broader official public sphere (education, press, politics), and from official communication in general. As Smith (2000: 165) puts it, “While standardized written English subsequently became the educationally enforced (and fixed) norm, socio-political and cultural events meant Scots did not develop similarly”. Indeed, it has as yet no agreed orthographic rules (Kay 2006). There is considerable uncertainty over the number of speakers of Scots. The most recent UK census of 2011 suggested a figure of around 1.5 million, but this is almost certainly too low in view of the unreliability of much of the data gathered using questions which made little sense to many respondents; given the low official status afforded the language – few Scots are aware even of its modest elevation to “regional language” in 2001 (Spolsky 2004: 124) – a considerable number of its speakers do not recognise it as Scots, referring to it instead as a dialect or even as “slang”. On the basis of its own research, the University of Aberdeen’s Scots Leid Quorum cautiously suggested a figure of 2.7 million speakers (Murdoch 1996). Though it stressed that such figures required context and hedged them with many caveats, this overall conclusion would seem persuasive to anyone familiar with the linguistic situation of the Scottish Lowlands.

It is much easier to give (relatively) more reliable data in relation to Welsh and Gaelic, both of which enjoy a certain level of official recognition and standardisation. Welsh has just over half a million speakers out of a total population of just over 3 million, while Gaelic, which we return to below, has around 60,000 speakers out of a Scottish population of just over 5 million, in other words just over 1 per cent of the total. This represents a significant challenge in terms of the economics of broadcasting, although an increasing amount of more recent research has aimed to isolate the extent to which the language can be understood as a general business asset (HIE 2014) and as an important economic aspect of cultural and media production in Scotland’s Central Belt (Chalmers and Danson 2009). The largest Gaelic-speaking communities – and therefore the largest potential audiences for Gaelic-language serials – are to be found in the Western Isles of northern Scotland (officially known for local government

purposes by their Gaelic name *Na h-Eileanan Siar*), particularly in the landmass of Lewis and Harris, though there are also sizeable diasporic groups in Glasgow and Edinburgh. In terms of the production of official Language Acts or Plans and similar political-cultural initiatives, Gaelic and Welsh have been treated very differently from Scots. Welsh was the first beneficiary of a Language Act in 1967 while the first Gaelic Language Act was not published until 2005. No such plan has ever been developed for Scots.

The importance of formal recognition of this kind cannot be underestimated in terms of its knock-on effect on broader cultural production, including television serial production (Shohamy 2006: 62). A striking example of broader cultural impact of such initiatives is the case of the Irish language in the Republic of Ireland. Irish – a Celtic language closely related to Gaelic and with a broadly similar level of penetration at between 1 and 2 per cent of the population – has since the founding of the Republic in 1916 always been much better resourced than its close Scottish cousin: it has since 1916 been officially the first national language of the Republic (English is its second official language) and as a result enjoys a range of advantages which attach to such a status, including the creation of the Irish-language television channel TG4 in 1996. The Irish-language television serial *Ros na Rún* started on the first Irish public-service channel RTÉ1 in the early nineties, and later moved to TG4 in September 1996. In its new location it has aired two episodes per week from September to May ever since, having now exceeded 1600 episodes in total. This is a level of official support that Gaelic-language television output in Scotland could only dream of.

### 3. RETURNING SERIAL DRAMA IN THE UK

#### 3.1 English-Language Serials: from Aristocratic Accents to the Irruption of the Local

The continuous long-running serial drama – now widely and popularly referred to in the English-speaking world as the “soap opera” or “soap” – was one the great staples of UK broadcast output in the first half of the twentieth century (O'Donnell 1999). This format first emerged in the UK (somewhat later than in the USA) on radio, to be joined shortly thereafter (but not replaced) by televised offerings. The pioneering radio soap, the BBC's *Mrs Dale's Diary*, ran every weekday afternoon from 5 January 1948 until 25 April 1969, clocking up more than 5000 episodes and firmly establishing

the returning serial as a viable broadcast form. The second, also a BBC production (radio was a BBC monopoly at the time), was titled *The Archers*. It began formally on 1 January 1951 (having broadcast five pilot episodes in the previous year) and continues to the present day. With its current total of over 18,500 episodes, it is the longest still-running broadcast serial of all time. Both of these productions had (and, in the case of *The Archers*, still has) a rural setting, something of a conundrum given that by the late-1940 to the mid-1950s, the UK was one of the most industrialised societies on earth. We return to the question of location below.

The first television soap opera was the BBC offering *The Grove Family*, launched on 2 April 1954. This was clearly a pre-emptive response by the BBC to the British parliament having passed the Television Act of that year, a piece of legislation which paved the way for the arrival of commercial television in the UK in 1955. This pattern of public-service channels launching television serials in response to the imminent arrival of new commercial channels would be one which would repeat throughout continental Europe in the 1990s (O'Donnell 1999) as a result of the liberalisation of television taking place at the time. It goes without saying that a television soap is a much more complex – not to mention more costly – undertaking than any radio version: for example, in terms of age, actors must credibly resemble the characters they are playing; wardrobe must likewise be in keeping with elements such as social status or occupation; and the fictional world must be physically created before the camera. There were also severe constraints imposed by the requirements of live broadcasting, the only option available given the technology of the time. Under these circumstances, five-day-a-week serials were simply out of the question. During its short three-year life (9 April 1954–28 June 1957) *The Grove Family* totalled 147 episodes, filmed in the Lime Grove Studios from which it took its name.

If location was a prime conundrum in *Mrs Dale's Diary* and *The Archers*, such dissonances in *The Grove Family* were also manifest in the way the characters spoke. Like early television throughout Europe, the UK lacked any kind of established cadre of actors familiar with the requirements of the new medium: the most obvious place to look for the required talent was almost always the theatre, with a very different history often closely related to national or international “classics” such as Shakespeare in the UK and elsewhere (for the case of France see Bourdon 2011), and a different understanding of what constituted appropriate diction (for a similar reliance on the Classics in the recently democratised Spain of the late

1970s see Gubern et al. 2000: 374–5). The result often bordered on unintentional comedy as when, for example, a cast member playing the part of a policeman – not widely known in the UK for their polished educated accents – would speak with a plummy Home Counties accent as if he were indeed a Shakespearian actor (the so-called “Home Counties” are those surrounding London). When speaking of Val Gielgud in 1992, Michael Barry – BBC Head of Productions in the 1930s and 40s – had this to say:

he appeared remote from our everyday, working lives ... There was, for example, his refusal to accept *Mrs Dale's Diary*, the long-running and popular radio serial as a worthy part of a drama schedule ... Serials had not as yet found a place in television programmes... (Barry 1992: 134).

But this was also part of the class atmosphere oozing from *The Grove Family*, the links between class and language being now a structural element of UK English-language soaps in general.

The first soap opera broadcast by the commercial Independent Television network (by then five years-old) was *Coronation Street*, which has run from 1960 to the present day, having now exceeded 9300 episodes. It marked the beginning in the UK of the now permanent relationship between commercial broadcasting, serial television drama and advertising, a relationship which had been cemented earlier in the field of radio in the USA in the 1930s (Sivulka 1998: 220). *Coronation Street*, which would break forever the rural and rather comfortable middle-class mould of *Mrs Dale's Diary* and *The Archers*, elevating the industrial and cultural prominence of the continuous serial, would dominate British serial drama in terms of ratings until well into the current twenty-first century. The contrasts with the previous regime were striking. “The British,” as Peris points out, “have long grasped that one cannot set all fiction series in London” (2018: 38), and indeed all the characters in *Coronation Street* not only came from the Greater Manchester area in the North of England (Dyer et al. 1981), they also spoke with instantly recognisable Mancunian accents – a clear signifier of working-class status in the UK's complex ideological mapping of accents and dialects. Major productions since then have featured the working-class Cockney dialect of London (*EastEnders*, 1985–, >5600 episodes), rural Yorkshire dialects (*Emmerdale Farm*, later shortened to *Emmerdale* to lessen the potentially negative effects of overweening rurality,

1972–, >8000 episodes), and the working-class Scouse dialect of Liverpool (*Brookside*, 1982–2003, 2915 episodes). The Channel 4 teen soap *Hollyoaks* (1995–, >4700 episodes) started off using only Standard English but quickly diversified and for many years now has featured a range of regional accents.

Scotland's contribution to English-language serial drama has been modest (O'Donnell 2007; Castelló and O'Donnell 2009). *Garnock Way* (1976–9, >300 episodes), produced by the commercial channel Scottish Television (STV) and set in a small working-class town midway between Glasgow and Edinburgh, was unceremoniously cancelled when the channel won the commission for a new serial with a wider reach, covering Scotland and parts of England. The ease with which this production was cancelled suggests that, in addition to “minoritised languages”, there may be grounds for talking also of “minoritised serials”, something to which we also return below. The “replacement” serial was *Take the High Road* (1980–2003, 1517 episodes, changing its name to *High Road* in 1993), a rural soap set in a small village on the highly picturesque banks of Loch Lomond, on the very edge of the Scottish Highlands; as Dunn puts it (2011: 3), it was “set firmly in a picture postcard Scottish world of mountain, loch and shortbread tin”. The language of this soap was English (with a mild Scottish accent) though Scots did make a brief appearance when the serial was in its death throes, and even then it was spoken by only one character (played by a well-known Scottish comedian).

### 3.2 Returning Drama Serials in Languages other than English

We will deal with these chronologically on the basis of when they were first broadcast. Wales has had its own Welsh-language soap opera since 1974. *Pobol y Cwm* (People of the Valley, >7000 episodes) (Griffiths 1995) was produced by the BBC and originally aired on BBC Wales, and is now the longest-running BBC television drama ever. In 1984, the program was moved to the newly launched public-service Welsh-language channel S4C, nine years before the passing of the Welsh Language Act, which stated that Welsh was to be treated “on a basis of equality” with English in the public sector and in its use in the legal system of Wales (Welsh Language Act 1993, section 5(2)). Moving the program to a Welsh-language channel, then, was one of an increasing number of signs indicating awareness of the UK not as a homogeneous monolingual polity, but as a somehow stitched-together “confected nation state” (Black 2013: 166). *Pobol y Cwm*

will shortly celebrate its forty-fifth birthday, and its even longer-term future appears comfortably assured.

The first Gaelic-language long-running serial was titled *Machair*, a term used to designate a kind of sandy grassland found in the dunes of western Scotland and north-west Ireland. It emerged into a less than welcoming linguistic environment, given the near total absence of Gaelic from the written press and its relatively poor levels of penetration on radio, albeit that a study by West and Graham (2011) indicated that 10% of the Scottish population came into contact with the Gaelic language via the radio. Launched on 6 January 1993, it was produced by STV and ran once a week on a seasonal basis, initially thirteen and later twenty-six episodes per season, until March 1999, clocking up a total of 151 episodes. While figures such as these are small beer compared to the gargantuan totals racked up by *The Archers* or *Coronation Street*, for example, they demonstrate two important things: (1) high-risk cultural innovation on television is not necessarily the prerogative of public-service models, even when the financial viability of the project is by no means assured; and (2) in the world of politics small groupings which can respond to a highly localised but clearly defined need can on occasion, given a favourable political conjuncture, achieve otherwise unexpected results.

The emergence of *Machair* was indeed the ultimate result of a political rather than an economic or even primarily cultural manoeuvre which came in the first instance not from within Scotland, but from London, a metropolitan centre which normally sees Scotland as peripheral and the Scottish Gaelic-speaking community as a kind of “periphery in a periphery” (Dunn 2015: 1). In December 1989, however, in an attempt to woo the votes of the electors of the Western Isles, Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government, no friend at the time either of Scotland or of regional/local identities more generally, made a surprising move. Responding to “a strong Gaelic lobby which had brought considerable pressure on a Thatcherite government striving to regain lost ground in Scotland” (Dunn 2011: 4), she announced the allocation of £8 million (later increased to £9.5 million) within the framework of its forthcoming Broadcasting Act to set up a Gaelic Television Fund. The aim of the fund would be to increase the amount of Gaelic-language television in Scotland from 100 to 300 hours per year, starting in 1993. When STV presented an unopposed bid for the renewal of its ITV franchise in 1991, this proposal contained a commitment to produce 200 hours of Gaelic-language programming, including a soap opera. *Machair*, an expensive production costing around £77,000 per episode, was the concrete result of that commitment and

the funders spent one-third of the entire available budget on its first season. It was shot initially entirely on location on the island of Lewis, though interiors were later shot at the new Media Centre in the island’s capital, Stornoway, and training needs – which were significant given the very small acting pool available – were met by the professional crew who also doubled as mentors and coaches. The local Gaelic speakers even attended story conferences and translated the original English-language scripts into Gaelic (Holmes 2009: 81). The original conception had been that Peter May and Janice Hally – both well-known Scottish scriptwriters with experience of writing *Take the High Road* amongst other credits – would mentor, monitor and help the work of emerging Gaelic scriptwriters, allowing them to benefit from their own tried and tested experience. In the event, the leap into high quality scriptwriting was initially a step too far for the Gaelic trainees; May and Hally became the principal scriptwriters for series 1, being joined by another seasoned scriptwriter, Anne Marie di Mambro, for series 2.

It would be fair to say that there was a certain amount of scepticism in at least some sections of the Scottish press more generally about the arrival of this Gaelic soap: indeed, some journalists referred to it dismissively as “Gaeldorado”, an openly sneering reference to the BBC’s failed 1993–4 UK soap *Eldorado*. Anecdotal reports also suggest that one scriptwriter (other than those mentioned here) indicated that they did not see the relevance of Gaelic in the modern world, but if the language was to be saved “then there was no better vehicle for this than through the creation of a popular soap”. In the event, the audience pull of *Machair* surpassed all expectations. Average audiences for the first season were 451,000, while the second episode was watched by no fewer than 516,000 viewers – almost eight times more people than there are Gaelic speakers in the country. It averaged a 28 per cent audience share in the Grampian area in the north of Scotland (with 40 per cent for the final episode of the first season) and 20 per cent in central Scotland: very healthy – indeed in some senses quite remarkable – figures given the general dislike of subtitled programmes in Scotland and the UK as a whole. *Machair* was deliberately presented as not just being relevant to Gaelic speakers – as an advertisement for the programme in the *Glasgow Herald* put it: “Adultery, loneliness, revenge. Some things do translate. *Machair*, 7.30 tonight, on Scottish” (7 January 1994).

In its first season, *Machair* was by any standards the most successful Gaelic-language programme ever to be screened in Scotland, despite some perhaps inevitable community



criticism of the standard or dialects of Gaelic heard from a number of on-screen characters. (A well-known Gaelic poet referred to some of the dialogue as being “teenage Skye Gaelic”, although this was probably unfair as some of those concerned were actually playing the characters of Gaelic learners). As might be expected, these large television viewing figures caused great euphoria among Gaelic-language activists, particularly those working in television. As Rhoda Macdonald, Head of Gaelic Programmes at Scottish (the former STV), put it in 1993: “Drama is the most popular form of television and it has a spectral appeal. People aged 5 or 85 will watch drama. ‘Machair’ makes Gaelic viable” (Macdonald 1993: 13). Despite these extraordinary viewing figures and the accompanying euphoria, however, *Machair* was unable to maintain its appeal. By the end of the 1996 season its viewing figures had fallen to 165,000, around one-third of its viewers three years earlier. Survival seemed increasingly unlikely, and with continued funding increasingly difficult to justify on economic grounds, its status moved from “minority-language” to “minoritised” serial. It limped on for another three years with steadily declining viewing figures before simply petering out in March 1999.

More recently, Scots has featured along with Scottish Standard English in BBC Scotland’s *River City* (2002, >1050 episodes). This production originally went out as two half-hour episodes per week, though this was later changed to a single weekly one-hour episode when competition for desirable timeslots with the long-established soaps became too intense – yet another example of “minoritisation”. *River City* represents a radical departure from previous patterns where Scots, to the extent that it has been present in the media at all, has been largely confined to the area of comedy – the niche role filled earlier by comedian Andy Cameron in *High Road*. *River City*, by contrast, takes Scots seriously, treating it as the language of everyday life that it is for many if not most Lowland Scots. The series avoids the disparaging stereotypes to which Scots has historically been subjected, particularly among the educated classes, while also acknowledging that it shares this linguistic space with the more politically dominant English.

The official English title of the second Gaelic-language soap to be produced so far – official in the sense that this is the one used by the producers in their advertising – is “The Ties That Bind”. A more literal translation would be simply “bonds”, though it is clear from a number of conversations in the narrative involving different characters that the kinds of bonds being referred to are indeed primarily, per-

haps even exclusively, familial. *Bannan* is produced by BBC ALBA, which is a co-managed partnership between the BBC Gaelic service (BBC Alba) and MG Alba (Meadhanan Gàidhlig Alba, literally Gaelic Media Scotland), the operating name of the Gaelic Media Service whose official remit under the Communications Act 2003 is to ensure that a wide and diverse range of high-quality Gaelic programmes is made available to persons in Scotland. (The preferred Gaelic translation of MG Alba had originally been *Seirbheis nam Meadhanan Gàidhlig* (The Gaelic Media Service), however this proved a problem given that its acronym SMG would have clashed at the time with that of Scottish Television’s parent body SMG, the Scottish Media Group).

Twenty-three episodes have been aired so far, consisting of a three-episode pilot followed by four series of five episodes each, covering the four-and-a-half-year period from 23 September 2014 to the present day, and – unlike *Machair* – the entire scriptwriting process, including story conferences and all communication within and with the crew, is in Gaelic. The benefits of an all-Gaelic or predominantly Gaelic team of camera and technical workers has previously been remarked on by other Gaelic TV directors (MacDonald 2015), and this was seen by *Bannan* director Mairead Hamilton, in her conversation with us, as advantageous within the programme’s present structure, allowing for the development of a more authentic dynamism in the production. It also nullified the key points of criticism made by McLeod (2002) and others regarding the then artificial “Potemkin Village” aspect of some Gaelic cultural and business models, whereby would-be “Gaelic” productions were put together using English means. Needless to say, however, twenty-three episodes over such a long period is a glacial rate of advance compared to mainstream British soaps, and even to *Machair*, something which clearly impacts negatively on the overall pace and energy of the serial.

## 4. REPRESENTING SCOTLAND IN TELEVISION SERIALS

### 4.1 Human and Linguistic Geographies

Rather than being purely geographical, peripheries are largely relational in nature: my centre can easily be your periphery, and the same location can just as easily fulfil both functions at the same time. The only senses in which *River City* might credibly be described as occupying a peripheral position in broader Scottish culture are its rather unattractive

scheduling – particularly compared to the English-language UK soaps, broadcast in Scotland at the same time as elsewhere in the UK and enjoying rather larger audiences than *River City* – and in the minoritised status of Scots itself. Otherwise this serial presents itself as fully engaged with the linguistic and other complexities of the dramatic situations it develops which it treats without fear or favour. The Scotland presented in *River City* is located in Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, well-known landmarks of which appear at the beginning of each episode. The physical environment provided by the purpose-built set in Dumbarton (south west of Glasgow) stresses, with its tenements and local shops, the general working-classness of the locale, always bearing in mind that working-classness in British soaps – and indeed in soap operas more generally – is a complex trade-off between, in Bourdieusian terms (Bourdieu 1992), unimpressive levels of economic/cultural capital and middle-to-lower-middle-class positions occupied mainly by small-business people (truly proletarian characters are an extreme rarity). But the main marker of working-classness – from a middle-class point of view also a peripheral identity in terms of social capital – is beyond any doubt the taken-for-granted and cringe-free use of Scots.

*River City* has from the outset been multi-ethnic in its casting, deliberately trying to reflect the reality of twenty-first century Scotland. Characters of Indian or Pakistani origin were present from the start (i.e. from episode 1), there have been characters of Chinese or more recently Polish origin, nationalities that are now a visible element of the Scottish population. There was also for a while a Gaelic-speaking character, who would on very rare occasions share brief conversations in Gaelic with fellow Gaels passing through (though never central to) the narrative. However tokenistic, *River City*'s nod in the direction of Gaelic has never been reciprocated by *Bannan*, which – though on rare occasions featuring brief exchanges in English – has yet to feature but the most cursory exchanges in Scots.

The Gaelic-language soaps are, needless to say, in a very different situation altogether. Gaelic is by far the dominant language in *Machair* and *Bannan*, though rather less comprehensively in the former where a certain amount of English was heard in most episodes, usually spoken by monolingual English speakers; an upside of this approach was that it made it possible for quite high-profile actors to appear in the serial even though they had no linguistic competence in Gaelic whatsoever. *Bannan*'s more thorough-going policy on this issue has ruled-out this level of English use, and occasions where it is used – mostly in Edinburgh or “Glasgow-near” settings

– are few indeed. The production is “conceived, written and directed in Gaelic” with even all trainee directors needing to be fluent. The most striking example of this policy in action was when the American character Nevada appeared in ten episodes in 2015–16. Although the American actress concerned (Annie Griffin) had no competence in Gaelic whatsoever, a coach was hired to teach her to say her lines in what eventually proved to be a very acceptable Gaelic indeed (albeit with a recognisable American accent). Both productions also make use of a range of dialectical terms, which can vary notably from one island to another: decisions on which form is the most appropriate in any given context are taken in close consultation with the cast. In addition, the occasional loan word is brought in when the corresponding Gaelic word would not be one in common usage – such as the English word “lottery” (success or non-success in which is a not uncommon theme in soaps).

#### 4.3 Discourses of Scottishness

In a highly influential essay, McArthur (1982) postulated three discourses which had dominated representations of Scotland for over a century: Tartanry, Kailyard and Clydesidism. Tartanry resurrects a lost past of tartan-clad Highland warriors traversing rugged and intimidating landscapes across unforgiving terrain. Well-known cinematic examples would include *Braveheart* and *Rob Roy* (1995 both). Less heroic and even kitsch examples also abound – kitsch being understood here in Eco's sense of “aiming at the sale of *pre-packaged effects*” (1964: 72) – particularly in the tourist industry where visitors are encouraged to buy biscuit tins featuring pipers, lochs and so on, very much the visual (though not necessarily social) terrain of *High Road*. Kailyard, whose name derives from a late-nineteenth-century literary movement, depicts Scotland as a country of small rural communities where everyone knew everyone else's business and the lower classes kowtowed to the local clergy, businessmen and even the occasional minor noble. Clydesidism derived from the industrial heartlands of the River Clyde, and was dominated by shipyard workers and miners with their highly masculine culture. A more recent variation – sometimes known as post-Clydesidism – offers a rather watered-down working-class feel and noticeably softened sexual politics: it is visible in a highly extenuated form in *River City* (O'Donnell 2007).

The dominance of these discourses poses significant problems for a “workable” representation of the Western Isles, “workable” in the sense that the native inhabitants might recognise themselves in them. Clydesidism, however “light”,



is simply not an option given the lack of any significant industrial infrastructure in a region dominated by crofting and small-scale local enterprises of various kinds. The flat and uninspiring landscapes of the Hebrides lack the grandeur of the northern Scottish mainland, and any heroic representation would be rejected by locals who lost any kind of control over their land and culture – including their language – after the calamitous defeat of the Battle of Culloden in 1745 and the Highland Clearances of the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, which decimated the Gaelic-speaking population. Only Kailyard, with its low-key close-community feel, appears to offer any potential, but this is made difficult by the fact the Western Isles are characterised by widely dispersed dwellings with relatively few opportunities for collective identity formation.

To date, neither *Bannan* nor *Machair* before it has entirely succeeded in developing a truly workable alternative discourse. Both serials feature genuinely Highland settings, being filmed in Stornoway and the Isle of Skye respectively (though both are set in the Outer Hebrides), and outdoor shooting is common in both, but these locations, differing strongly from both the Scottish Lowland and the mainland Highlands and lacking an identifiable discursive frame, become as a result the key semiotic marker of the Western Isles as an “elsewhere”, with frequent shots of windswept empty beaches under leaden skies or brooding clouds, isolated farmhouses or long shots of cars making their way along windswept winding roads. All of this has echoes of the rather regressive discourse of the “Celtic twilight” (Chapman 1978), the term deriving originally from a book of poetry by Yeats but now more commonly used to present the islands in particular as isolated and lost in the half-light, staring out to sea rather than back to civilisation. Musically this has also been represented in the past in what has become known as the “lone sheiling complex” (McArthur 2003: 59), where romanticised Gaelic songs (such as the *Canadian Boat Song*, recorded by D. M. Moir in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century) nostalgically harked back to when Gaelic-speaking families would spend summers in small sheilings – bothy-like huts with few if any amenities – which allowed sheep to be monitored while in pasture. These visual tropes have been used again recently to represent the remoteness of the Shetland Islands off the north-west of Scotland as depicted in the popular detective drama *Shetland* (2013–). In fact, these scenes exude what is now known in the UK as a strong “Scandy” (i.e. Scandinavian) feel, familiar to viewers as a result of the unprecedented popularity of Swedish, Norwegian and Danish series in recent years. As

*Bannan*'s producer Chris Young said during the Edinburgh International Film Festival after a screening of the pilot in 2014, “It seemed to go down very well. We want to emulate the success of the Scandinavians”, adding immediately afterwards “although it is nothing like *The Killing*, *Borgen* or *The Bridge*” (Jew, n/d). As we shall see later, despite its many qualities, *Bannan* does not seem likely at the moment to tackle anything as hard-hitting as the Scandinavian dramas, or even as the long-running UK soaps, although issues such as racism and murder have more recently reared their heads, giving the series a “darker” feel than it previously had.

## 5. NARRATING THE LOCAL

In a wide-ranging review of European soap operas, O'Donnell (1999) theorised three levels of narrative which can be found in any returning serial drama: (1) the micronarrative – the level of small-scale, highly localised personal or business relationships; (2) the metanarrative – the level of what might broadly be called “current affairs”, where scriptwriters constantly bring in issues from ongoing public debate, often combining these with elements from the micronarrative; and (3) the macronarrative – where the moral values defended by the soap at the levels of both the micro and the metanarrative merge to create the overarching moral universe offered to the viewers. Though the macronarrative is the most abstract of the three levels, O'Donnell (1999) argues that this is where the success of the production stands or falls. This is the level at which the soap keeps both itself and its viewers “up-to-date”, and producers and scriptwriters are constantly monitoring the media in all its forms (now including social media) in order to identify the pressure points of public debate. When a sufficient level of pressure is reached, these issues are drawn into the soap, often tracking very substantial societal changes including in recent years in attitudes to homosexuality, euthanasia, same-sex marriage and others. It is in the metanarrative, in giving greater breadth and depth to the micronarrative and framing the overall ethical force of the serial as a whole over time, that the “centre” of any such production is to be found. Metanarratives, as a result, require considerable nurturing and care.

*Pobol y Cwm*, with its dependable funding source, large talent pool and even larger surrounding Welsh-speaking population, has had no difficulty finding and maintaining such a centre, to which its more than forty years on air amply testify. But not all soaps have been so lucky, well-resourced or imaginatively crafted. If they fail to keep up with social

change they will become dated and even irrelevant and will eventually fail. *High Road* was a vividly illustrative example of such a process. In a country undergoing rapid change as a result primarily of globalisation and the advancing neoliberal economic hegemony in the eighties and nineties, the series' combination "of romantic Highland scenery and of gossipy rural parochialism" (Dunn 2011: 2) lost all power of attraction. A last ditch attempt to save it through a rapid and ill-thought-out toughening of its metanarrative (including the sudden appearance from nowhere of a local secondary school with all its associated problems of truancy, bullying and even drugs) failed to pull it through. *River City*, though, set in an urban environment with an endless supply of such material, has so far had little difficulty meeting this challenge. *Machair* suffered a somewhat similar (though not identical fate) to *High Road*, not helped by the difficulty in renewing the Gaelic-speaking acting pool to keep up with generational change.

*Bannan*'s challenges in this respect seem many; in written correspondence with us, *Machair* scriptwriter David Dunn took a decidedly gloomy view of the programme's prospects. Rather than looking forward or breaking new ground, his judgement was that:

it a) relied on the trope of the returning Gael, b) was sluggishly directed and acted with no greater competence or confidence, c) didn't significantly benefit from the move to Skye which simply produced a more generalised West Highland rather than Island setting. I lost interest thereafter so can't comment on how it has developed.

Given that, for the reasons mentioned above, Tartanry and Clydesidism are no longer viable representational strategies, the only option left – the one to some extent adopted by *River City* – may be some updated version of Kailyard, complete with laptops, social media and so on, but with a less physically tightly-knit community, perhaps even mobilising social media to overcome its spatial dispersion and develop a properly functioning metanarrative. But it is precisely a functioning metanarrative which is lacking at the moment. Its highly dispersed characters, lacking a geographical centre of gravity or even a common dialect, struggle to form any kind of identifiable common core with a shared simultaneous time frame. In this respect we could usefully compare *Bannan*'s recent 2017 rape storyline with the famous rape storyline in *Brookside* in 1986. While *Bannan*'s storyline was of a historic rape – it had happened several years earlier – where the iden-

tity of the rapist was slowly stumbled upon after a number of false trails, giving the story more of a "whodunnit" feel rather than being an exploration of gender violence, the *Brookside* rape happened in the immediate past, and the victim's wordless anguish and desperation were shown by her sobbing attempts to wash herself clean in the shower in a scene which older viewers remember to this very day.

When we raised this issue of the metanarrative with Mairead Hamilton, her answer was that the moral framework aimed at by the producers was "caring", one which could provide a both human and narrative "glue" for the dispersed island communities within a narrative which was itself of necessity stretched out due to limited funding available. This was an entirely coherent response. She drew our attention to the strong female-driven narratives and the female characters around which many of the storylines revolved, from the "matriarch" Peggi (apparently one of the most popular characters in the soap) to one of the younger characters Màiri – "a matriarch in the making". This she put down to the strong female scriptwriters now creating the plots. She was also pleased that the stability given by the recently announced funding deal would allow further development of the individual characters over the longer term (she cited the emerging racist nature of one). In terms of making itself relevant to younger members of the Gaelic community, she believed that the soap was on the "cusp of something exciting", but as it went forward it was important to draw on interactions with young Gaels through social media, citing the Norwegian production *Skam* (2015, 43 episodes) as a possible inspiration to examine. *Skam* is a web-based teen-oriented television drama series where new clips, conversations or social media posts are published online as the series is aired, thus allowing a contemporary connection with young Norwegians globally. Referring to the use of social media generally, she commented that the hashtag #*bannan* had received the most reactions ever on twitter with its storyline about the murder.

She also provided a convincing rationale for the serial's rather unconventional opening. While most soap operas start "in medias res", *Bannan* opened with a clear reversal of classic folk-tale structure (Propp 1968) which typically begins with the "hero" leaving home in response to the "call to adventure" (Campbell 2008: 41-8), returning later in victorious mode. *Bannan*, however, opens deliberately in the mode of failure, with Màiri returning defeated from her time on the mainland, only to slowly discover the caring environment awaiting her in Lewis. In some ways this unconventional opening and narrative strategy is a daring move, and certainly deserving of

support, but whether or not *Bannan* will have the narrative and other resources necessary to breathe both life and audience-gripping energy into this as-yet embryonic and intermittent community remains at this point an open question.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The “multichannel society” (Lundby and Futsæter 1993) is now firmly established, and we appear to be moving ever more rapidly towards “spreadable media” (Jenkins et al. 2013) – media formats which can be adapted to almost any cultural environment, of which the most striking example to date is surely the many adaptations of *Ugly Betty*, including a Hindi version complete with Bollywood-style song and dance routines (McCabe and Akass 2013). In this context, the future of the long-running UK television serial does not look particularly rosy. While *Coronation Street* is usually still among the most viewed programmes of any week in the UK (mostly around position four or five) with roughly 8.5 million viewers, it is now heavily out-gunned by shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* (around 8.5 million) or even on occasions by documentaries such as *Blue Planet* with just under 13.5 million, and peak audiences have fallen from over 30 million in the 1980s to around 8 million today (November 2017 figures from <http://www.barb.co.uk/viewing-data/weekly-top-30/>). By contrast, the overall viewing figures for the BBC ALBA channel have in general well surpassed the original projections, which were set by the BBC Trust in 2011 to be at least 250,000 people on a weekly basis. According to audience research by TNS-BRMB, overall viewing figures over the past three years were in excess of 600,000 viewers with a mid-2013 peak at 780,000 viewers. According to BBC ALBA figures, this represents 15% of the Scottish audience over 16 years of age. Indeed, Ofcom’s annual reports on BBC ALBA over a six year period from 2008 to 2014 indicated that audiences, when asked whether BBC ALBA was a worthwhile thing for the BBC to be spending the licence fee on, answered positively, with between 41% and 66% of respondents agreeing with this statement with a Likert-scale score of 8, 9 or 10, 10 indicating “strongly agree” (Ofcom 2014).

Is it possible for minority-language serials such as the ones examined here to survive in a context of the diminishing economic returns outlined above, even if the cultural returns may be appreciable? The answer can at best be a tentative yes, but inevitably at the cost of sacrifices of all kinds. *River City* has survived partly by shifting from a two-ep-

isode-per-week pattern to a longer single episode per-week, a tactic which avoids unwinnable clashes with much stronger competition but results in a more fragmented and discontinuous narrative. Despite the original euphoria, *Machair* could not sustain its original narrative vigour and as a result moved to ever less advantageous positions in the schedules before disappearing altogether – a fate suffered by numerous European soaps in the late nineties and later. The news that *Bannan* has now been “green-lit” until 2020 gives room for hope: speaking in June of this year, Chris Young, head of the company producing *Bannan*, accepted that production had been somewhat “ad-hoc” to date due to the lack of a long-term commitment, but suggested that the new infusion of money would allow “more risks” to be taken (*The Scotsman*, 20 June 2017). Investigations of social media interaction and the lessons of on-line productions may also be of some help. But as Umberto Eco argued many decades ago, the success of television serials does not lie in the (inevitably) repetitive nature of what he calls “the contents of the message”, with their recurrent combinations of the old and new, but in the way “in which the message transmits those contents” (1985: 135 – his italics). Shrewdly selected and imaginatively narrated risks may well provide *Bannan* with a creative (rather than a geographical) edge which it has lacked so far. As stated earlier, in our view the path to this level of creative engagement must lie in the metanarrative. A greater and more lively engagement with debates relevant not only to those living on the islands, but also to Scots more generally, whether Gaelic-speaking or not, offers the best hope for survival.

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## FILMS

- Rob Roy* (1995)  
*Braveheart* (1995)

## RADIO SERIALS

- Mrs Dale's Diary* (1948–1969)  
*The Archers* (1950–)

## TELEVISION SERIALS

- Bannan* (2014–)  
*Borgen* (2010–2013)  
*Brookside* (1982–2003)  
*Coronation Street* (1960–)  
*EastEnders* (1985–)  
*Eldorado* (1993–1994)  
*Emmerdale* (1972–)  
*Garnock Way* (1976–1979)  
*High Road* (1980–2003)  
*Hollyoaks* (1995–)  
*Machair* (1993–1999)  
*Pobol y Cwm* (1974–)  
*River City* (2002–)  
*Skam* (2015–)  
*The Bridge* (2011–)  
*The Grove Family* (1954–1957)  
*The Killing* (2011–2014)  
*Ugly Betty* (2006–2010)